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Alaska National Guard finds overdue aircraft with no survivors

CAMP DENALI, Alaska – An Alaska Air National Guard helicopter crew spotted the wreckage of an overdue aircraft March 5 with no survivors onboard.

The HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter from the 210th Rescue Squadron with a Guardian Angel team onboard from the 212th Rescue Squadron located the overdue aircraft at approximately 10:22 a.m. near the 4,000-ft level of Rainy Pass. All three people on board are deceased. Alaska State Troopers have notified next of kin.

The Guardian Angel team extricated the bodies from the wreckage of the plane. Because of incoming weather and the safety of the site, the Alaska Air National Guard removed the bodies from the scene and is bringing them back to Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson where they will be turned over to Alaska State Troopers.

The 182 Cessna was reported overdue around 4 p.m. March 4 when Merrill Field Tower controllers reported to the 11th Air Force Rescue Coordination Center that a Cessna 182 aircraft had not arrived in Takotna and was supposed to have done so around noon. The RCC began calling airfields in the area of the projected flight path to check if the aircraft had landed somewhere other than Takotna. According to the RCC, the pilot did not file a flight plan.

"When pilots file a flight plan with the FAA, the FAA initiates a search for an overdue aircraft typically much sooner than when an aircraft is reported late by family or friends," said Senior Master Sgt. Robert Carte, superintendent of the RCC.

After airfields in the area reported no sign of the overdue aircraft, the RCC tasked the Alaska Air National Guard to begin a search.

At approximately 5:50 p.m., an HC-130 refueling aircraft from the 211th Rescue Squadron and an HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter from the 210th Rescue Squadron launched from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage with Guardian Angel pararescue teams aboard. They each searched for approximately eight hours before returning to JBER for crew rest.

"Nothing was spotted, nothing was heard last night," Carte said. "Yesterday we conducted what is called a 'hasty search,' extensively looking in areas along the projected flight route known to cause problems for aircraft. Today, we have moved into the 'extended search' in which we have given grid assignments to search aircraft and are searching in a systematic manner."

There were at least 10 coordinated aircraft searching for the overdue plane today.

An Alaska Air National Guard HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter with a Guardian Angel team aboard launched around 8 a.m. An Alaska Air National Guard HC-130 aircraft with another Guardian Angel team aboard soon followed suit. An Alaska Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter from 1-207th Aviation also joined the search this morning. In addition, the Birchwood and Merrill Field Civil Air Patrol were also involved, as well as several Good Samaritan pilots and Iditarod Air Force aircraft. The overdue aircraft was not part of the Iditarod.

The pilot had a personal locator beacon in his vest and a 406 emergency locator transmitter onboard. The Search and Rescue Satellite Aided Tracking, or SARSAT system, has not picked up a signal for either beacon. According to the RCC, the pilot was experienced and traveled well equipped for emergencies.

Alaska State Troopers will release the names of those on board.

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